

FREDERICK LAW OLMSTED NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

RESTORATION OF THE FAIRSTED LANDSCAPE

I don't object to the cutting away of certain bramble patches if brambles are to take their place - or anything that will appear spontaneous & not need watering or care. More moving or dug ground I object to. Less wildness and disorder I object to.

—F.L.O., Sr., 1884

FREDERICK LAW OLMSTED acquired the property he called “Fairsted” in 1883 when his work on the Boston Park System demanded that he relocate from New York City to Brookline. This move also afforded Olmsted easy access to his colleagues who lived nearby – architect Henry Hobson Richardson and Charles Sprague Sargent, founding director of the Arnold Arboretum. Here he established both a home for himself and his family, as well as the nation’s first full-scale professional office for the practice of landscape architecture. Together with his sons and successors, Olmsted dominated the field in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and created many of America’s most treasured landscapes.



Between 1883 and 1930, Olmsted and his sons transformed the simple farmstead into a distinctive example of Olmstedian residential design. Fairsted met Olmsted’s minimal requirement of an acre of land for a freestanding house. The outdoors was treated as an integral part of the household, including an “open-air apartment”, or conservatory, that linked the interior spaces and exterior grounds. Design concepts illustrated here include an “indefiniteness of edge” and the “subordination” of individual features to a whole. Although Olmsted incorporated some of the existing woody plants such as a prominent American Elm, the farmstead was completely reorganized to reflect his ideal domestic design. The result is a landscape consisting of an undulating and asymmetrical grass area (south lawn), a rustic dell (hollow), a shrub-planted outcropping (rock garden), a bank of trees and shrubs (west slope), a circular drive, and service areas. Historical photos reveal an extraordinary profusion of plant material, the ultimate expression of

the picturesque landscape, and certainly the “wildness and disorder” that Olmsted described in the above letter to stepson John Charles in May, 1884.

Following Olmsted's retirement and subsequent death in 1903, sons John Charles and Frederick Jr. continued the firm as the Olmsted Brothers, adding wings to the office complex and enhancing the landscape to create a *"place we should be proud to take clients to"* and a *"place of interest to and study by the men in the office."* The intensity of maintenance gradually diminished over the years, however, and both the buildings and grounds were in serious disrepair when the National Park Service acquired Fairsted in 1980, with only the "bones" of the historic landscape still apparent.



In 1991, the Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation and the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site embarked on an ambitious project to recover the original design and appearance of Fairsted c.1930 – a period which represented the height of the firm's activity and one for which there was substantial documentation. The project team analyzed information gathered in the inventory and research phase of the project (1991-94) and incorporated this into a Treatment Plan which prescribed actions needed to recover the lost design. Since a single design plan did not exist for the property, the team assembled the critical historic plans, photos, planting order lists, etc. to create a new 1930 "period plan" that provided the objectives and intent for the restoration.



During the first phase of onsite restoration, approximately 130 nonhistoric trees and 100 nonhistoric shrubs were removed. Additional work between 1995-96 prepared the site for replanting including pruning existing overgrown historic shrubs, soil amendments, and a seasonal irrigation system. In the final phase of implementation between 1997-99, missing trees were replaced and a huge quantity of historic shrubs, vines, and herbaceous plants were replanted. Together the project team addressed many issues unique to historic restoration, particularly those related to the retention and replacement of historic plants: problems of scale, competition between old and new plants, availability, susceptibility to pests and disease, and vegetative damage to historic structures.



Other challenges for the project team included the design of compatible and accessible entrances, repair and replacement of masonry features, substitution of surface materials, and the development of a public relations strategy in advance of tree removal, site demolition and construction.

Visitors to the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site today have a rare opportunity to tour historic offices where important landscapes were created, view design plans and photographs, and then experience what historian Cynthia Zaitzevsky describes as a *"landscape (that) displays, in microcosm, all of the characteristics of Olmsted's landscape style, a consistent philosophy of design that can be seen in his parks, suburbs, campuses, and residences alike."* Fairsted's restored landscape is both a model of contemporary cultural landscape preservation and a living exhibit of the same design ideals and craftsmanship that inspire millions of visitors to Olmsted designed parks across America.

In 1999, the Fairsted Historic Landscape Restoration received a Merit Award for Design from the American Society of Landscape Architects Professional Awards Program.